

DEALING WITH DENIAL

By Domenic Marbaniang

One issue that leaders face continually is the issue of denial. “Denial” may be defined as the act of asserting that something alleged is not true. Such assertion may either be verbal or behavioral, or both. Psychiatrists refer to it as a kind of defense mechanism in which a person denies the reality of certain facts in order to avoid the discomfort associated with them. The denial may be of the reality of a fact or of the seriousness of it, or of both. In many cases, it also appears as a mechanism to avoid responsibility in a given situation. Though, lying is a direct form of denial, there are still others like false justification, caricaturizing, and minimizing that also fall into the category of denial. In this article, we’ll look at denial with regard to leadership situations.

Few examples of denial are as follows:

- Adam denied his responsibility in the crime at Eden. He projected the blame on Eve, instead, to somehow escape divine censure.
- Pharaoh denied the greatness of Jehovah despite being struck by the plagues. His political obsession with keeping Israelites as slaves made him minimize the seriousness of God’s command.
- Saul refused to recognize the choice of David by God for the throne. He imagined that, somehow, what had been prophesied against him wouldn’t happen and that he would retain the throne.
- The worshippers of Baal kept on hurting themselves in hope that their god would respond.
- Gehazi denied being elsewhere when he had really gone after Naaman. His memory somehow denied the prophetic ability of Elisha as he succumbed to greed.
- The Israelites kept doing things against the Law, despite the warnings of the prophets, saying “the Temple is here, the Temple is here”. They were denying God’s definition of holiness and used the Temple as a shield behind which they could do their works of darkness.
- The people in the days of Haggai refused to build the Temple since they didn’t consider it to be very important.
- The Pharisees and the Sadducees rejected the claims of Christ despite Scriptural and providential (miraculous) proofs.
- Peter denied any relationship with Christ in face of persecution.
- Felix refused to listen to Paul anymore when he began to speak about things pertaining to God’s Kingdom.

Often times, the act of denial leads to a kind of self-deception in which memory itself begins to get conformed to the false tendencies of the will. In such cases, a return is almost impossible since the imagination has already overshadowed reasonability. While denial may be looked at as a defense mechanism of the organism; yet, one must be careful to not deny the role of will in deciding for or against any ideas arising from a situation. One must remember that falsehood is never beneficial at the end.

Voluntary and Involuntary Denial

Voluntary denial refers to that denial which is willful and persistent. It persists in falsehood despite evidences contrary to it. Involuntary denial refers to that in which the decision of the will is absent or delayed. It is mechanical in nature and often is an initial response through a defense mechanism of the organism that seeks to avoid the unpleasant. For instance, when someone hears of the death

of a beloved one, the initial response might be disbelief or denial. Such initial response of the organism prevents against hasty shock and might be preparative and directive in the ascertaining of truth. Such denial doesn't fall under the purview of morality since the will has not yet been brought into rational accountability in it.

Hamartiological Analysis

Spiritual Roots

In John 8: 44, Jesus declares the Pharisees to be the offspring of the devil. He says, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (RSV).

Obviously, the devil was not their genetic father but a father in the sense of their being part of the rebellion of falsehood began by him. Falsehood and lying are natural to the devil since, by rejection of the truth of God, he has turned his back on all truth-values. The demonic kingdom operates basically on falsehood and influences the kingdoms of the world to do so. Worldly politics, religions, and businesses use falsehood as an instrument to gain and retain power over human minds. Jesus categorizes all such leadership practices as demonic in origin. Tendencies towards falsehood are sharp in any intellect that refuses the rule of the Spirit of God.

The Pharisees were incapable of acknowledging Jesus as the Christ of God because their inclinations were in favor of the devil's desires – "Your will is to do your father's desires," He said. All rejection of God-given leadership is an instance of demonic rebellion (1Jn. 3:12; Jude 1:11; 1Sam. 19:9ff). Even within Christian leadership, Paul asks Timothy to not include a novice as a candidate for leadership; for it is possible that he become lifted up in pride and fall into the condemnation of the devil (1Tim. 3:6). Similarly, Christians who haven't matured and are still carnal can't properly accept or acknowledge the value of the other in the family of God since they are ruled by worldly standards of acceptance and egotistic desires for self-aggrandizement (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1ff) after the manner of the devil (Isa. 14:12-14).

Spirits of Deception

The tendency to reject demonic influence in hamartiological analysis (or analysis of sinful instances) is a mark left by secular theologies. Of course, there is the danger of extremism in both cases and one need to draw a line of balance. In the preface of his *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis wrote:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

The Bible clearly states that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (1Tim. 4:1,2). The warning is against those who renounce the truth by embracing falsehood. This is one way in which cults arise claiming hold over some particularly distinct truth unsupported by the Scriptures. The elements of deception in the world that keep people blinded from the truth of God also fall into the purview of the kingdom of darkness.

The Bible, therefore, exhorts one to be watchful (1Pt. 5:8), never give an occasion to the devil through prideful or resentful anger (Eph. 4:26), and to beware of the wiles and deception of the devil (Eph. 6:11; 2 Cor. 11:13-15) who attempts to destroy the Body of Christ.

Selfish Carnal Passions

Jude talks about mockers in the last days (those who deride the things and offices of God) as those “who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 19). The psalmist draws a picture of their departure from truth in Psalm 1:1:

- Step 1: Walking after counsel of the ungodly: Placing worldly wisdom and views above the Scripture.
- Step 2: Standing in the way of sinners: Expressing one’s approval of or neutral opinion regarding things that the Bible expressly calls “sin”.
- Step 3: Sitting in the seat of the scornful: Assuming the position and the role of the rebel, the derider and opposer of all God’s truth.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one” because it’s evident that the enemy of our souls can easily use situations in life to distort reality and confuse decisions. Such followers of sinful flesh easily rebel against all truth. The temptation to give in slowly to the current of worldly opinion is strong and leaders must beware of that.

Dealing with Denial in the Self

Jesus gave the first code of examination when He stipulated, “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). He told the hypocrite to first remove the beam in his eye before he could remove the mote out of his brother’s eye (v. 5). Self-examination is crucial for a leader’s spiritual health.

Following are some questions that can help ascertain if one is a denier:

1. Do I try to justify some action of mine that my conscience accuses me of (1Jn. 1:8-10)?
2. Am I angry with someone for some fault of mine (Gen. 4:5-8)?
3. Do I feel threatened by someone’s progress (1Sam. 18:7-9)?
4. Do I have doubts regarding the Bible, God, and ministry (Ex. 32:1ff; Pro.30:9; 1Tim. 4:13-16)?
5. Am I doing or saying things to make people think of me what is not really true of me (2Cor. 12:6)?
6. Do I regard the Biblical warnings as not very serious, particularly in connection with my situation (Jer. 7:10)?
7. Do I consider someone as inferior to or less important than me (Phil. 2:3)?
8. Do I try to defame or slander someone (behind his back or openly) without regard to any proof in favor of him/her (Prov. 19:5,9)?
9. Do I wish to be safe, regardless of what happens to others (2Sam. 23:16)?

Following are some ways to deal with denial in one's self:

1. Examine oneself in the light of Scriptures (1 Cor. 9:27; Ps.1:2).
2. Confess and renounce all sin and false justifications (1Jn.1:9).
3. Be committed to the truth in every situation (2Cor.13:8).
4. Deny self and seek to please Christ alone in every situation (Matt. 16:24; Gal. 1:10).
5. Encourage others and invest in them for the glory of God (1Thess.5:11).
6. Confront sin in others; this guards against compromise (Eph. 5:11; 1Cor. 5:2; 1Tim.5:20).
7. Make prayer, hearing from God, and fellowship a priority (1Thess. 5:17; Prov. 28:5; Heb.10:25).

Dealing with Denial in Others

One must beware of the following things when confronting denial in others:

1. Do not be hasty in confrontation (Pro. 14:29; 29:20).
2. Do not let hearsay cloud your opinion about the other. In fact, do not even let appearance influence your view of the other person for in doing that you can be partner in evil (Jn. 7:24; Pro. 17:4).
3. Before confronting someone, make sure that you're first of all in the right (Matt. 7:1-5).
4. Do not confront unless you're certain that you need to (Acts 24:25).
5. Do not confront unless you're confident that you're equipped for it (1Tim. 3:16; Tit.1:9).
6. Listen to the Holy Spirit before you're going to confront and speak (Jn. 16:7, 8).

The steps of confrontation may be as follows:

1. Recognize the individuality, dignity, and freedom of the other as given by God (Gen. 1:26).
2. Be updated about the denier's latest position. This is important since it's possible that the denier might already have been feeling remorseful and has repented of his falsehood. One way to do that is to ask questions in that direction. Jesus provides a classic approach to this when He confronts Peter without talking about the three denials he made. On the contrary, He just asks him if he loved Him more than the other things; and when he replied in the affirmative, Christ asked him to work for Him (Jn.21:15-17).
3. Be confident of your authority from God, not to destroy but to construct (2Cor. 13:10).
4. Be gentle and caring (Matt.11:29; 2Tim. 2:24; Jas. 3:17)
5. Only proceed if you're sure that the person is open to reason, to a fair discussion (Isa. 1:18; Jas.3:17; Prov. 1:5; 10:8).
6. Remember that God is the one in total control of the situation (Acts 5:34).
7. Gently show the person the facts of his/her situation and give space for his/her approval or denial of them (Jn. 4:9-19).
8. Remember that the person reserves the final decision to accept or reject the truth and God oversees it all (Prov. 16:1,2).

9. Provide answers as long as you're sure that the denier is honest about his/her questions (1Pt. 3:15).
10. If you're unable to answer sufficiently, do not fail to express your disapproval of falsehood in any case (Jn. 9:24-33).
11. Seek the help of other leaders if necessary (Matt. 18:17).
12. Aim at restoration (2Cor. 2:4-11).